

Notre Dame Law students provide critical legal aid through Appalachia Externship



For over a decade, Notre Dame Law School students have dedicated their fall and spring breaks to immersing themselves in the rich culture of Appalachia while confronting the stark realities of extreme poverty and providing legal services to those in need. Their experience is part of the Appalachia Externship, a partnership with [AppalReD Legal Aid](#), the primary legal services organization serving eastern

Kentucky, and private attorney Ned Pillersdorf. Students tackle a diverse array of legal needs, ranging from civil rights cases to environmental issues tied to rural poverty and coal mining operations. This unique partnership allows students to witness firsthand the systemic issues affecting individuals and communities while providing essential support to those navigating complex legal landscapes.

This fall's cohort includes second- and third-year law students Elijah Hales, Kyle Johnson, Quinn Kelly, Jake McKinley, and Kimberly West—five dedicated Notre Dame law students committed to making a meaningful difference.

One focus of this fall's trip was addressing legal issues from the aftermath of the [Eric Conn notorious Social Security fraud scheme](#), a scandal that has impacted thousands of individuals in Kentucky struggling with overpayment debts and disrupted benefits.

Working closely with attorney Ned Pillersdorf, who has tirelessly advocated for Conn's former clients, the students helped to disseminate vital information regarding recent policy changes from the U.S. Social Security Administration (SSA). The SSA announced it would cease collection of overpayments from many affected individuals, providing much-needed relief to those still grappling with the consequences of Conn's fraudulent activities. Through outreach efforts, the students ensured that this critical information reached individuals navigating the complexities of the SSA system, many of whom had suffered from the burden of unexpected debts.

In addition to their work on Social Security issues, the students participated in various community legal services with AppalReD attorneys. They drafted wills for seniors, which were subsequently reviewed and notarized by attorneys, and assisted individuals in filing for pro se divorces. All services adhered to the income eligibility requirements set forth by AppalReD, the local designee of the Legal Services Corporation. Moreover, the externship involved research on changes to Kentucky law regarding Guardian Ad Litem roles and domestic violence protective orders, enabling students to engage in important discussions about legal reforms aimed at better protecting vulnerable populations.

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